

AI for Sustainable Development: What's the Business Case?

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ABSTRACT

The world is rapidly changing — due to many inequalities in our neoliberal society, but also due to the current Covid crisis, to be followed by a severe economical crisis. These crises will enlarge the already existing inequalities all over the world. In particular the inequalities between rich and poor, between literate and illiterate people, and between North and South. This crisis is the cause of great stress.

In 2006 a new type of company was established, called the B Corp. This new legislation started in the US (currently in 40 States) and protected the company from the existing shareholder-driven mentality. Instead of working for shareholders only, companies were going to work for all of its stakeholders. The legal form for this was the Benefit Corporation, but existing companies could also select to perform an impact analysis, called the BIA (Benefit Impact Analysis). With this analysis companies could qualify to become a certified B Corp.

After 14 years since its inception, there are now around 3,000 B Corps worldwide and around 5,000 Benefit Corporations, mainly in the US. Examples of well-known B Corps are Patagonia, Ben & Jerry's, Danone, Triodos Bank and African Clean Energy (ACE).

Besides this development of a new kind of company that uses the slogan “Business as a force for good” there is also another trend going on in the world, having to do with the exponential development of technology. The speed in which technology develops surpasses the adaptability of the human brain to every new step, also causing stress in the world.

Knowing that technology can be used for good and for bad, and that both directions cannot very well be influenced or steered by governments, we can only hope that technological developments “for good” are faster and more numerous than the bad ones.

Now, the Business as a force for good and the Technology as a force for good seem to come together and could potentially support each other. If we can define profitable business “for good” and that business is a technology business helping to solve the above-mentioned inequalities, we are making a big step in the direction of a better world.

This keynote describes these two developments in more detail, trying to come to a definition of a profitable business case using technology (especially AI) to improve the lives of many.

CCS CONCEPTS

• Information Systems; • World Wide Web; • Web Applications; • Social Networks; • Social and Professional Topics; • Computing / Technology Policy; • Human-Centered Computing;

KEYWORDS

Business, AI for social good, sustainable entrepreneurship

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1 THE AUTHOR

Leen Zevenbergen was, after his high school in The Netherlands and in Texas, trained as an economist and accountant. He holds a masters degree in Business Accounting from the Erasmus University in Rotterdam.

After his graduation he quickly discovered that being employed (at Philips Corporate Accounting) was not the way forward for him. At age 24 he started his first company, called Bolesian. This was the first Artificial Intelligence company in The Netherlands.

Being the master of his own destiny he started another 20 companies after this first one, among them companies in areas like Virtual Reality and Computer Graphics (based in Silicon Valley). Most companies were technology oriented, in software (Escador), in renewable energy (Solarus.com) and in Education (Ubiquity University).

In between creating and starting companies, Leen Zevenbergen managed several large multinationals in many countries, companies like Pink Roccade and Origin.

Following his first book “Rip off your necktie and dance”, Leen Zevenbergen wrote two other books about both entrepreneurship (“T'is Groen en groener wordt het niet”) and sustainability “Sustainability @ the Speed of Passion!” His latest book is “Once upon a Future” about the current and future crises, he wrote together with Ruud Veltenaar: Ruud Veltenaar & Leen Zevenbergen. Once Upon A Future. 2020. Bertram + de Leeuw Uitgevers, Haarlem, The Netherlands. ISBN: 978-94-6156-264-7..

Having been Chairman of Social Venture Network Europe and being Co-Founder of B Lab Europe makes him one of the European leaders in the field of sustainable entrepreneurship.

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